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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 GUATEMALA 000102

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES MILITARY-TO-MILITARY
RELATIONSHIP WITH MOD

Classified By: DATT COL RICHARD NAZARIO FOR REASON 1.5 (A) AND (D).

11. (C) Summary: During an introductory call on MOD Robin Moran, the Ambassador restated USG policy in dealing with the Guatemalan military and reviewed the benchmarks for possibly establishing normal military-to-military relations. The Ambassador said that the military needs to improve its human rights performance, especially its cooperation with other agencies, show positive results in curtailing illegal activities, and increase transparency in the military budget. The MOD acknowledged the problems in the bilateral relationship and agreed that more needs to be done. End summary.

12. (U) On 9 January, 2003, Ambassador Hamilton paid an introductory call on Minister of Defense, Major General Robin Moran. The meeting took place at the MOD's office; the Ambassador was accompanied by DATT and the MILGROUP Commander.

13. (C) The Ambassador began by telling the MOD frankly that the Guatemalan military continues to have a negative image in the USG, based largely on the human rights abuses committed during the internal conflict, the lack of cooperation in ongoing investigations into these atrocities, and deeply ingrained corruption. The Ambassador noted that there is a perception that, in the last couple of years, the military has moved backwards in terms of human rights protection and budget transparency. As a result, the current USG restrictions, which prevent normal military-to-military relations in terms of training, FMF and other military assistance, will remain in place. When the Guatemalan military shows significant progress and complies with the six benchmarks (see para 11) that we have previously discussed, the U.S. Executive would be prepared to advocate lifting the restrictions with the Congress.

14. (C) The Ambassador noted that one of his personal goals while in Guatemala is to see Guatemalan military performance improve to such an extent that compelling arguments could be made for restoring a full military-to-military relationship. He said that it is up to the Guatemalan military, however, to show that they have reformed to such an extent as to merit a restored relationship.

15. (C) The Ambassador told the MOD that there is a high probability that Guatemala will be decertified based on poor counter-narcotics cooperation, and that this would affect other areas of the bilateral relationship. The Ambassador noted that recertification could be possible, even in the current year, but would take a determined effort by the government to deal effectively with this problem. The Ambassador said to the MOD that it is imperative that the military redirect its priorities and resources, and increase cooperation with other government agencies to combat drug trafficking together and show positive results. The Ambassador also told the MOD that the military needs to cashier corrupt officers and eliminate the influence that some retired military officers have over military matters such as promotions, assignments and operations. He also mentioned the imperative to do all possible to put an end to threats against the Guatemalan human rights community.

16. (C) An apparently sincere MOD thanked the Ambassador for his frankness and his candid observations regarding the weaknesses of the military. The MOD said that these types of criticism have provided him with ammunition he needed to fight corruption and eliminate "bad apples." The MOD explained that he had used recent declarations made by US officials about parallel forces and corruption to get authorization from President Portillo to remove from active duty several senior officers allegedly involved in corruption.

17. (C) The MOD described other initiatives that the military is taking to professionalize the institution, such as a major restructuring that will involve the reduction of approximately 6,000 members of the Armed Forces and the closure of several military installations around the country. This restructuring will save money in salaries and overhead maintenance of the installations. The money saved could be used to improve quality of life, training and equipment. The MOD said that the personnel reduction involves approximately 1,000 officers and 5,000 enlisted personnel and specialists. The MOD noted that he was promised a budget allocation by

April to compensate officers and specialists for their services and to contribute to their retirement pensions. In response to the Ambassador's question about how these officers will be selected for retirement, the MOD said that an honor selection board will be formed to review each officer's record and standard of living. Those officers with a record of bad performance or who cannot justify their standard of living based on their salaries or other legitimate income will be removed first.

18. (C) The MOD tried to justify the need for secrecy of the military budget in order to be able to protect the country, and the lack of more active participation by the military in anti-narcotics operations based on scarce resources. The Ambassador responded that there are several ways to justify the military expenditures and budget to their Congress while maintaining legitimate state secrets. In regard to the lack of resources, the Ambassador suggested that the military needs to be more aggressive in working with the judicial system and other government institutions to find ways to use seized assets from anti-narcotics operations, such as boats and airplanes, against illegal traffickers.

19. (C) The MOD stated to the Ambassador that on December 31, 2002, he traveled to Mexico accompanied by the Minister of Government to meet with their counterparts in order to increase regional cooperation in the fight against narcotics traffickers. The MOD stated that the pledge for cooperation between both countries was put to the test immediately upon his return when the Mexican Navy was allowed to enter Guatemalan waters in pursuit of narco-traffickers, and captured two go-fast boats and over 2,200 kilos of cocaine. The MOD said that he needs more resources and intelligence cooperation to be able to be more responsive to these types of operations. The Ambassador stated that based on current restrictions, the Guatemalan military should not count on any US material assistance other than advice and intelligence cooperation, but instead the military should seek increased regional cooperation and reprioritize use of their current resources.

110. (C) Comment: The Minister of Defense clearly values the relationship with the USG, and was open in acknowledging the problems that have kept the bilateral military-to-military relationship at a low in recent years. While anxious to work with us to improve the relationship, particularly in reducing the influence of former military officers and in increasing military cooperation against transnational criminal threats, Moran did not suggest that the GOG is moving to address the specific benchmarks for restoring IMET and FMF. We will continue to use his interest in a better relationship with us to seek concrete action on the benchmarks during the coming months.

111. (C) In the interest of comprehensiveness, the six benchmarks are:
-- Military cooperation with investigation into human rights abuses committed during the internal conflict;
-- Disbandment of the EMP;
-- Removal of certain key officers implicated in corrupt activities, human rights offenses, or organized crime;
-- Full military cooperation and intelligence sharing with the USG against narcotics, alien smuggling and terrorism;
-- Cooperation of the military (D-2) with civilian authorities to identify individuals and groups harassing human rights workers and provide intelligence;
-- Military recognition of congressional (civilian) oversight of their budget.
Hamilton